

Here's what happened in Jonah 3: in response to the preaching of God's Word, Nineveh believed God and turned away from their evil. God then turned away from the evil He had planned for Nineveh. But when we turn back to Jonah in 4:1, the prophet turns to evil. Most of our translations miss the wordplay in 3:10 and 4:1, but Nineveh's *evil* way, God's promised *disaster*, and Jonah's *displeasure* are all described with the same Hebrew word, *evil*. What God did in sparing Nineveh seemed *evil* to Jonah, and so he responded in fierce *anger* towards God's mercy.

Now, here's the danger we face when we hear the story of Jonah: we can make the prophet into such an irrationally prideful, selfish, and angry man that we can no longer see ourselves in Jonah. We're all standing over on God's side; we love mercy and grace, and so we're shaking our heads at the stubborn prophet, instead of looking for reflections of Jonah in our hearts.

Our mistake is to identify ourselves with God, and not with Jonah. When we do this, we stir up the same prideful, selfish spirit that made Jonah who he was, and we miss God's call to humble ourselves, turn from our disobediences, and cry out to Him for mercy. And so in order to see ourselves in Jonah, we need to try to understand his anger, not in order to excuse it, but so that it becomes something that we can identify with. We won't grow spiritually by shaking our heads at Jonah. We *will* grow if we recognize the roots of our anger in Jonah's story, and open ourselves up to embrace the scandal of mercy.

So why is Jonah so very angry at something so wonderful as mercy and forgiveness? There are three aspects that feed into Jonah's anger: first, Jonah feels *betrayed* by God. We see this when he begins his complaint by going back to the past: "Isn't this what I said would happen?" Jonah thought that he and God had worked out an understanding, and that if God was going to spare Nineveh, it would only come after some pretty severe chastising, like Jonah himself experienced when he disobeyed God. But Nineveh escapes judgment through immediate repentance.

Second, the mercy that God showed Nineveh seemed to Jonah to completely *undermine God's justice*. Nineveh was not made to suffer or sacrifice or face any serious consequences for their sins. How is that just? How can that be right? Because they don't face any consequences, Jonah is angry at Yahweh for showing them such undeserved grace.

Third, by showing mercy to Israel's enemy, Jonah thought that God was *abandoning His special covenant love for Israel*. And this third aspect seems to be at the heart of Jonah's anger: when God dealt with Nineveh in chapter 3, the name *Elohim* was used, but now in chapter 4, Jonah uses God's *covenant* name, Yahweh, and in 4:2 he quotes God's famous self-description that He gave to Moses while confirming His covenant with Israel on Mt. Sinai.

Jonah's mind is focused on God's covenant, and what he sees is a God who is using him to bless Israel's persecutor and pouring out special covenant blessings on people who were strangers to the covenant. God has apparently shifted his allegiance to Nineveh, and made Jonah a traitor to Israel in the process, since Jonah's preaching led them to God's mercy.

Not only that, the Assyrians *have* harmed and *will* harm God's people in the future. So whose side is God on? If God is going to help Israel's *enemies*, then what good is it being a covenant member? Has God rejected His people? If that's the case, Jonah, thinks, paralleling Moses in Exodus 32, then he needs to force God to make a choice: either kill me, Jonah is saying, or kill Nineveh! And the fact that he's trying a very similar move to the one Moses used indicates that Jonah doesn't actually want to die; he's trying to force God to keep what Jonah believes God's covenant obligations are.

And if we understand this covenantal point, it helps clear away some misreadings of the source of Jonah's anger. It's not uncommon for people to think that Jonah's problem with God's mercy is about racism (ie, Ninevites aren't Jews) or nationalism (Ninevites aren't from Israel). Don't misunderstand; God condemns both ethnic pride and nationalistic exclusivism in *other* places in the Bible; but in *Jonah*, the problem isn't primarily racism or nationalism, it's Jonah's merciless take on covenantalism.

Jonah knew quite well that other ethnicities were welcome to join God's people – Moses married an Ethiopian or Cushite woman, for instance. He also knew that other nations could be something like covenant friends of Israel – not covenant *members*, exactly, but covenant-adjacent. This is why he's happy to go to Tarshish, historically part of a nation *friendly* to Israel and her God since the days of David and Solomon.

But for Jonah, the covenant formed the *exclusive* basis for God's mercy, especially through the sacrificial system. And so he became very angry when what he thought was the *exclusively covenantal blessing* of mercy was given to *strangers* to the covenant. God had no right to show mercy to Nineveh because they were not the covenant people, and they didn't approach God in the covenant way!

In this way, Jonah is actually foreshadowing the main conflict that Jesus will face in His day: by insisting that Jewish covenant-keeping is the only way to please God, he's a proto-Pharisee. And *now* it makes a lot of sense that when the Pharisees demanded a sign from Jesus, the only sign He would give them was the sign of Jonah, a sign that should have taught them that God's mercy was not restricted to His covenant, and in fact, God's covenant was meant to be the means of *extending* mercy to the nations!

But Jonah does not yet understand this. When we read Jonah, we read it through the lens of Jesus, and Jonah looks much worse in that light than he would to someone reading the book of Jonah *before* Jesus came. But as I said before, while I hope this helps us understand Jonah, it doesn't excuse him. He couldn't know what we know, but he knew enough about God that he should never have made this mistake.

What Jonah does is use his understanding (really, misunderstanding) of the covenant to interpret God, rather than interpreting the covenant in light of God's character. In other words, Jonah loves the covenant privileges more than he loves God; he's made the covenant into an idol. If God doesn't care as much about the covenant as Jonah does, then Jonah says, "It is better for me to die than to live."

Notice what's happened: when Jonah bumps God off of the throne of his heart, he starts evaluating things by a man-centered measure: it's better for *me*. Why is God's world no longer a fit place for Jonah to live in? Why should God refuse to show mercy to Nineveh? Why should God be *quick* to anger? Why should God ignore Nineveh's repentance and bring disaster on them anyway? Because, Jonah says, "It's better for me." And this is the sentiment that lies at the heart of all human anger; anger expresses this conviction: "It's better for me that things were different."

Deep down, human anger attempts to displace God so that you can run the universe the way you want it to be run. And before we hit a flashpoint like Jonah, we hide our idolatry behind piety, like Jonah. He's claiming to be the one who is faithful to the covenant! He thinks that his justice is better than God's!

This makes anger at God a particular danger for God's people. We take His gracious promises for granted, as if God were now obligated to do our will. Because God chose us, we think that we are something special. Because God gives us gifts, we think He *owes* us those gifts. When we forget that any and all of His covenant blessings are gifts of grace mercifully given to undeserving sinners, we begrudge His mercy to others.

And because it's better *for you* that God shows mercy to you, you praise God for the mercy He gives to you. But when that mercy goes to someone who has hurt you or wronged you, someone who doesn't have the same close relationship with God that you have had, someone who hasn't served God faithfully like you, then your response to mercy is fierce and furious anger. You feel betrayed, wronged by God, because what He has done isn't better for you. And when that's your measure of mercy, you will very quickly find a reason to be angry with God.

And it really doesn't take anything as dramatic as the destruction of your geopolitical enemies to see this same dynamic in your life. What's your reaction when someone sins against you, and then receives mercy from God? One of your siblings lives a foolish life, repents, and everybody celebrates their testimony while nobody wants hear about your years of boring obedience. Your abusive father finds Jesus and lives out his later years with a joyful heart that's forgiven and free, while you are still dealing with the hurt and pain. Your wife abandons you and marries a richer, better looking man, and years later she acknowledges her sin and apologizes, but at the end of the day, she's happily married to him, and you're still single and miserable. What happens when God shows mercy to the person who led your child away from the faith, to an abortionist doctor, or to ISIS? Mercy in general to sinners in general is great, but when that mercy is shown to people who have hurt you, that's when mercy makes you angry.

It's easy at those moments to feel like God has betrayed you. It's easy to feel that justice hasn't been done; that covenant blessings have been stolen by wicked rebels through a cheap trick called repentance. And so you sit with Jonah, watching as the fast of repentance ends and a feast in celebration of mercy begins, as it surely did for Nineveh.

And as Jonah remembers the names of his friends who were skinned alive by Assyrian swords, and the screams of mothers he knew from his synagogue as they held the dead bodies of their children, and the hunger and suffering of the families reduced to begging for bread because their fathers and sons never came back from fighting the same soldiers who are now joyfully embracing the mercy of God, that mercy is evil in his sight, and he becomes so angry that he doesn't even want to be alive anymore.

This is not a children's story about a big fish. This is an incredibly painful reality that we need to reckon with: God shows mercy to wicked people who hurt us, and it's not better for us. Anger actually seems like the right response.

And our text today ends with a very powerful question from God: "Do you do well to be angry?" Is your anger appropriate? Is it justified? Next time, we'll talk about God's response, but today I want to say that this problem is very real, even for people who don't believe in God.

Sometimes, bad people flourish and good people suffer, even on a secular understanding of what that means, and I want you to hear this: this problem will drive you to the cross of Jesus Christ, and if you do not find an answer there, then you will not find *any* answer that is better than burning anger and a desire to die.

But through the gospel we learn the fundamental truth that any good that you experience in this life comes to you as *undeserved* mercy from God, and any suffering that you experience at the hands of others is *less* than the judgment that a Holy God would bring against you if He operated by a standard of merciless justice. Even though we lose sight of this truth, it is better for you that God is merciful.

And realize this: if anyone has good reason to be angry at mercy, it isn't you; it's God. Sinners ruined the good world He made for them, spent the breath He gave them on running from Him, and crucified His beloved Son on a cross. And each week, millions of people who fit that description crowd their way into His house, expecting to be welcomed, loved, blessed and fed from His table, without having paid for their sins, simply because they repented and put their faith in a message they heard preached by another sinner. If God were like us, there would be no hope of mercy, only a fearful expectation of judgment.

And yet because of who Yahweh is in Himself, entirely apart from who you are and what you do, God lays His anger by, and He *does* welcome you here. This mystery of mercy should have you trembling and falling on your face.

And at the cross, we see the only righteous and good man who ever lived receiving *no* mercy from God, bearing the punishment for the sins of the world on his shoulders, so that you, a sinner whose offences against God are far more morally serious than any wrong that you have ever suffered here in this world, may be forgiven and receive mercy from God, mercy that is only possible because justice has been fully satisfied, mercy that you in no way deserve, mercy that flows solely from the heart of a God who relents from bringing disaster upon you because He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*